

Interpreting Depositions: A Fact Sheet

Here are a few things to keep in mind if you are ever contacted to interpret at a deposition.

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1. Prepare very thoroughly: learn not only the facts of the case and points of law, but also the names of the law firms, the companies and/or individuals, exhibit numbers, and amounts involved. Figure out in advance which symbol you'll use for each name.

Lawyers tend to speak very fast during depositions, perhaps to buy time or to obfuscate, and those names and numbers need to be ready to roll off your tongue.

2. Rehearse the situation using YouTube and other online sources.

There is plenty of material about preparing for depositions. Although it is mostly meant for lawyers, it will help you too. There are even lots of videos of actual depositions.

3. Hone your consecutive skills. Remember to rely on your memory above all.

This is the toughest, most demanding consecutive interpreting assignment I can think of. You'll be tempted to regress to early training days, when notes were more of a crutch than a signpost – don't.

4. Be as literal as possible: reformulate only if there is no alternative.

This is in aid of your memory: try too hard to understand in great depth and you'll lose track.

5. Only interpret. Never try to answer a question made to you by the witness or talk aside with them during the hearing itself or breaks.

If this happens, immediately translate what the witness is saying, e.g., "The witness is asking me whether I know a good place to buy leather around here" or "The witness is telling me his wife is also

a translator". It is very important for both parties to trust you and be sure that you would never take sides, no matter which party actually retained your services.

6. Ask speakers to repeat names as many times as necessary.

Never hesitate to do this; better to appear "dense" once than to call Obama "Osama" and remain forever on tape to be heard over and over again.

7. Expect scapegoating. Don't take it too personally if someone claims you have mistranslated something.

Once, a witness with excellent English claimed he would be more comfortable testifying in his own language, but then proceeded to correct my every word – with less-than-perfect results. He also kept asking me to repeat, so I was forced to explain to the lawyers that the witness wanted me to repeat my translation, then restate what I had said to the best of my memory, and finally accept the criticism and the correction. It was hard to keep a poker face, but I soon realized it was merely a tactic to wear out the other side: I was just collateral damage.

8. Be prepared for abrupt changes in register; don't get caught off-guard. Highly educated language may be followed by colorful street slang.

Harvard-graduate lawyer: "Sir, I need to ascertain the genuineness of the exhibit I am about to present to you. For the record, this is Exhibit A453. Can you unequivocally attest to the fact that this letter was written by your Uncle Tom?" Deponent: "Listen, man, you'll have to give me a full ear here. I'm no hobnocker¹. I told ya' already, I ain't gonna pretend I recognize the letter if I wasn't with Uncle when he wrote it".

¹ A hobnocker is someone who does something illegal and gross.